

Tampa Ironwork
Tampa and Ybor City
Hillsborough County
Florida

HABS No. FL-272

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HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA
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Historic American Buildings Survey
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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

TAMPA IRONWORK

HABS No. FL-272

In 1886, at the urging of the Spanish engineer, Gavino Gutierrez, Vincent Martinez Ybor moved his cigar factory from Key West to an undeveloped area of Tampa, Florida. Other manufacturers of hand rolled cigars followed Senor Ybor. At the end of the nineteenth century, Tampa was the largest manufacturer of cigars in the world. It was reputed in 1900 that the Customs House at Tampa accounted for one-sixth of the entire revenue of the United States Government because of the collection of import duty on tobacco and the excise tax on cigars. Ybor City, named after Vincent Ybor, became a boom town. The cigar manufacturers imported hundreds of cigar workers from Cuba, Spain and Italy. These workers were housed in company houses in Ybor City and in West Tampa.

The first structures in the Latin areas of Tampa were wood frame. The old wooden commercial buildings were slowly replaced by substantial brick as the merchants prospered. Most of this brick construction was completed between 1903 and the first World War.

The merchants would have a store built on the first floor and their own living quarters on the second floor. Several rooming houses or hotels were built in the same manner.

Tampa, in summer, is a hot, humid city. In order to take advantage of every breeze, balconies were added to the second floors of most brick commercial/residential buildings. Since the City apparently made no objection, the balconies were extended over the public sidewalks. Probably a hundred buildings eventually had balconies. In 1973, there were still forty buildings showing evidence of once having balconies. As the balconies became dilapidated, the City made the owners remove them and others were removed voluntarily by their owners. There were only twelve balconies remaining in the entire city in the summer of 1973.

It has always been felt the buildings and their balconies were either Spanish or Cuban. Investigation gives no credence to these beliefs. The buildings were not built by the Cuban, Spanish or even the Italian immigrants. These people were skilled cigar workers, and were not craftsmen and artisans of the building trades. A search of the Tampa Tribune newspaper files of that period indicates that the building contractors in the area did not have Latin or Italian surnames. The buildings were, therefore, actually built by native born Americans, and are, except for the balconies, similar to other buildings of the period.

The bricks were imported, usually from Georgia. The balustrades were locally made of standard materials. The balcony supports were made from standard galvanized pipe and fittings. The balusters were simple forms, usually worked cold, from bar stock and bolted together. There is only railing possibly of wrought iron and none of cast iron.

Because of the appearance of so many balconies in a "Latin" area, it just became assumed that these were Cuban balconies. It is true that during the balcony era that Ybor City and West Tampa did have a strange or foreign flavor. The addition of high balconies that covered the sidewalks visually reduced the width of the streets by twenty feet and thereby did create a different urban feeling.

Written Summer 1973 by:

Historic American Buildings
Survey Summer Team